



Research Publication · 2026

THE MENTAL LOAD INDEX

The state of invisible labor in American households

A research summary of what is known about the mental
load: what it is, who carries it, and what it costs.

Compiled by AVA in July 2026.

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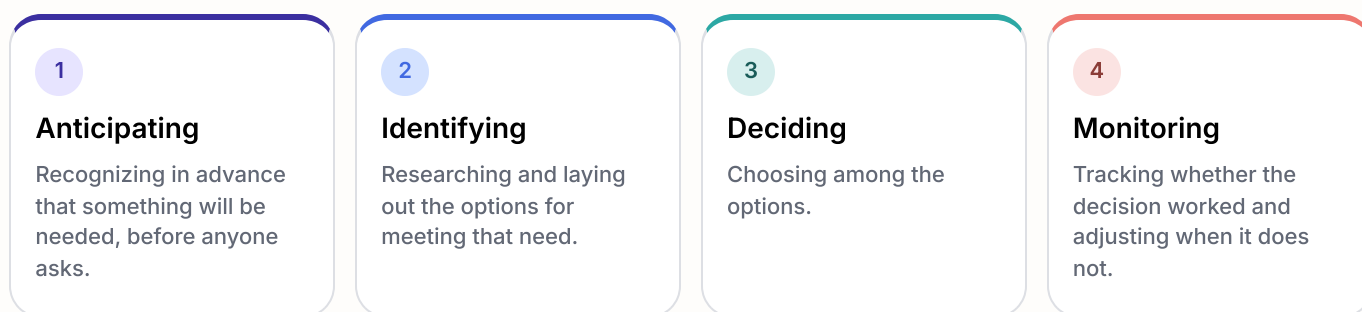
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What the Mental Load Is

The mental load is the cognitive and organizational work of running a household: the continuous, largely invisible thinking required to keep a family fed, scheduled, healthy, and prepared.

It is distinct from physical housework. Cooking a meal is visible labor. Knowing what is in the fridge, what is expiring, what everyone will eat, and when the groceries need to be reordered is mental load.

Sociologist Allison Daminger, whose framework has become the field's working definition, describes cognitive household labor as a four-stage activity:



This work is chronic rather than episodic. It runs in the background whether or not any physical task is underway, and it does not end when a task is delegated.

Researchers call this the delegation paradox: even when someone else performs the task, the person carrying the mental load usually keeps the thinking behind it.

A partner cooks dinner, but she still holds the running inventory of what is in the kitchen. A babysitter drives to soccer, but she still tracks which uniform is needed and when the cleats stopped fitting. A form gets filled out, but she remembers that it expires in twelve months. The cognitive labor outlasts the physical task.

Recent research has begun to break the mental load into measurable components. A 2025 study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* distinguishes between core mental load, the daily recurring work of meals, schedules, clothing, and routines, and episodic mental load, the occasional higher-stakes work of medical appointments, school transitions, and seasonal planning. Both fall disproportionately on women, and core load is the more heavily gendered of the two.

Core mental load

The daily recurring work of meals, schedules, clothing, and routines.

Episodic mental load

The occasional higher-stakes work of medical appointments, school transitions, and seasonal planning.

Who Carries It

The mental load is real, large, and structurally feminized. Every credible dataset that has looked for it finds the same pattern, and the pattern holds even after accounting for income, work hours, and education.

The visible time gap

The Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2024 American Time Use Survey, released in June 2025, is the cleanest national time-budget data available. Mothers spend roughly 47.6 hours per week on primary and secondary childcare combined. Across all households with children, women average 2.7 hours a day on household activities to men's 2.3, and on a given day 48 percent of women do housework against 22 percent of men.

47.6 hrs

per week on primary and
secondary childcare
combined (mothers)

2.7 / 2.3

hours a day on household
activities (women / men)

48% / 22%

do housework on a given
day (women / men)

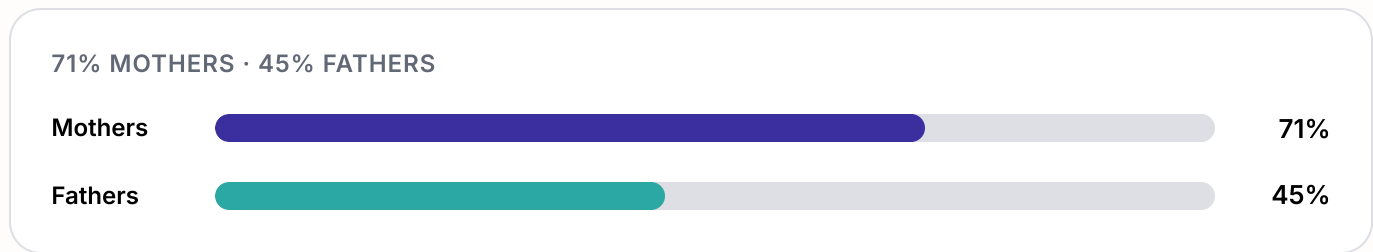
+17 hours

per week

Combining childcare and household work, mothers do more than 17 additional hours each week compared with fathers. For mothers with a high school education or less, the gap is wider still: 29.8 hours per week to fathers' 10.3.

The invisible cognitive gap

The cognitive share of the load is even more lopsided than the visible one. Research by Ana Catalano Weeks, Helen Kowalewska, and Leah Ruppanner, published across several 2025 papers, finds that mothers hold primary responsibility for roughly 71% of household cognitive labor, while fathers report primary responsibility for 45%. The two figures sum to more than 100 because some labor is claimed by both partners, which is itself a finding: cognitive labor is more often contested than physical labor, yet the contested ground still falls predominantly to mothers when the data is cleaned.



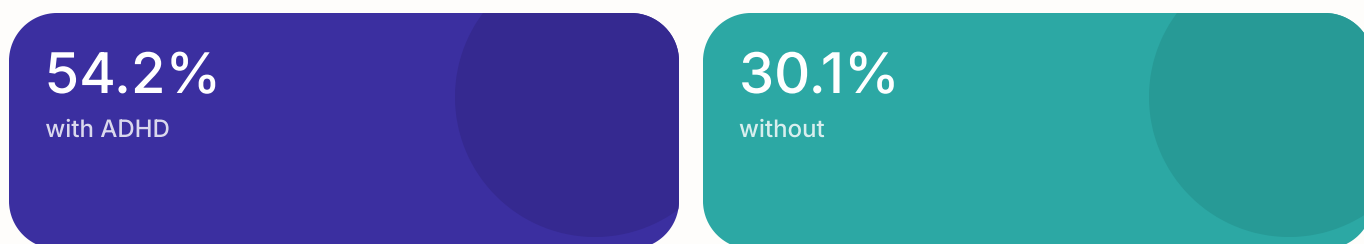
It does not move when money or power moves

The most striking finding in the recent literature is that the cognitive load is resistant to the factors that usually shift housework. Daminger showed in her 2019 *American Sociological Review* paper that the gap persists even when controlling for paid work, income, and education.

Weeks and her colleagues confirmed it in a 2025 *Socius* study of 2,133 partnered, heterosexual US parents: when mothers earn more or work more hours, they do less of the physical tasks, but the cognitive labor sticks to them anyway. Their most-quoted conclusion is that the mental load is, in effect, unmovable.

Where it lands hardest

The women carrying the heaviest cognitive load are often, biologically, the women whose brains are being asked to work hardest to hold it. A 2025 population-based cohort study by Jakobsdóttir Smári and colleagues, drawing on the Icelandic Stress-and-Gene-Analysis (SAGA) cohort of 5,392 women aged 35 to 55, found that women with ADHD experience perimenopausal symptoms more severely, and roughly ten years earlier on average, than women without ADHD.



The likely mechanism is that estrogen regulates dopamine in the prefrontal cortex, the seat of executive function. When estrogen drops, the brain's capacity for planning, working memory, and emotional regulation drops with it. The mental load, the late-diagnosis ADHD now being identified in millions of women, and the perimenopausal cognitive shift frequently converge in the same decade of life, in the same person.

What It Costs

The consequences of the mental load are measurable across mental health, household economics, and even civic life.

Mental health

Maven Clinic's February 2025 State of Women's & Family Health Benefits report, drawn from 1,569 HR leaders and 3,752 full-time employees across the US, UK, and India, found that 92 percent of working parents report symptoms of burnout. Working mothers are more likely than working fathers, more likely than coworkers without children, and more likely than the general population to experience depression and anxiety. Eighty-one percent of working parents want their employer to do more about parental burnout, and 80 percent report their organization has nothing in place.

In August 2024, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a formal advisory, *Parents Under Pressure: The Mental Health and Well-Being of Parents*, declaring parental stress a public health crisis. The advisory found that 48 percent of parents say their stress is completely overwhelming most days, and 41 percent report being so stressed they cannot function.

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of working parents report symptoms of burnout (Maven Clinic, 2025).

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of parents say their stress is completely overwhelming most days (US Surgeon General, 2024).

Economic value

Attempts to price the unpaid work put its scale in stark terms. Insure.com's 2025 Mother's Day Index, now in its fifteenth year, values the average mother's unpaid household labor at \$145,235 a year, up 4 percent from 2024. Globally, Oxfam's 2020 Time to Care report estimated the value of women's unpaid care work at \$10.8 trillion a year, three times the size of the global technology industry, and called even that an underestimate because it priced the work at minimum wage.

\$145,235

a year: the priced value of one mother's unpaid household labor (Insure.com, 2025).

\$10.8T

a year: the global value of women's unpaid care work, three times the tech industry (Oxfam, 2020).

Civic cost

A finding that has not yet been widely absorbed extends the cost beyond the personal and economic. Ana Catalano Weeks's August 2025 paper in the *European Sociological Review*, The Political Consequences of the Mental Load, finds that at high levels the mental load crowds out cognitive space for political engagement. Women carrying the heaviest load report reduced interest in national political issues and less frequent political discussion with friends and family. At scale, the mental load is not only a personal and economic cost but a civic one.

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The State of the Mental Load in 2026

After a generation of research, the phenomenon is no longer in doubt. The mental load is real, it is large, and it is feminized.

It does not redistribute when women earn more or work more. It falls hardest on the women whose brains are simultaneously navigating ADHD and the hormonal shifts of midlife. And it carries measurable costs: to mental health, to household and national economies, and to civic participation itself.

The load that women have carried silently, inside their own heads, for generations is now one of the best-documented patterns in the study of family life.

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